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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WARSAW 002286

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SUBJECT: REVIVAL OF JEWISH LIFE IN POLAND, BUT CHALLENGES
PERSIST

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Classified By: Political Counselor Mary T. Curtin for reasons
1.5 (b) and (d)

11. (U) SUMMARY: Twentieth century Poland's history of Jewish relations has made many Jews see Poland solely as a Jewish cemetery and hotbed of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism persists, but is no worse than most European countries, and rejection of anti-Semitism is on the rise, notwithstanding the presence of anti-Semitic elements in the ruling coalition. Few outside of Poland realize that there is an active Jewish community in Poland that is growing in size and diversity, and non-Jews are also becoming increasingly interested in learning more about Polish-Jewish shared history. This new community faces challenges, both from within and without. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Following the Holocaust, many Jews who survived left the country and most of the remainder of the decimated Jewish population hid their identity. The pogroms in Krakow (1945) and Kielce (1946), which saw hundreds more Jews murdered, further cemented this phenomenon. The 1968 Polish political crisis and expulsion of Jews was the final nail in the coffin, driving almost all remaining Jews out of the country and forcing those that remained even further underground. From a high of 3.3 million Jewish residents pre-Holocaust, by 1970 the Jewish population numbered less than 5,000. Thus many Jews around the world saw Poland only as a Jewish cemetery and a hotbed of anti-Semitism, a place where "children take in anti-Semitism with mother's milk," as former Israeli PM Yitzhak Shamir famously said. This image persists to this day, but another, more positive trend is taking place.

PEEKING OUT OF THE FOXHOLE

13. (U) Few outside of Poland - even those who devote time and money to Holocaust remembrance - realize or acknowledge that there is a Jewish community in Poland at all, let alone a growing one. Jewish tour groups from the United States and Israel generally visit only Nazi death camps, keeping the twin images of Poland as a Jewish cemetery and hotbed of anti-Semitism as the only possibilities. But while statistically speaking the level of anti-Semitism in Poland has remained relatively constant, at around 40 percent expressing dislike for Jews (so called "anti-Semitism without Jews"), the level of those rejecting anti-Semitism is on the rise, especially among young, educated urbanites. Various press outlets try to outdo one another in revealing

anti-Semitic statements by members of coalition partner League of Polish Families' (LPR) youth wing. The impromptu rally in support of Israel in Warsaw on July 30 during the opening days of the Hizballah conflict, where over 500 Poles - mostly non-Jews - gathered on the streets, further underscores this change.

14. (U) Even the Israeli Embassy admits that politically it has no stronger ally in Europe than Poland. And despite the questionable anti-Semitic attitudes of coalition partners LPR and Self Defense (SO), President Lech Kaczynski, Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, and their Law and Justice (PiS) party often say and do the right things on thorny issues such as anti-Semitism, Holocaust memorial sites, and property restitution. This has encouraged many Polish Jews in hiding to peek out of the foxhole and acknowledge their identity. The appointment of four new Rabbis in Poland during this summer testifies to this new trend. New orthodox rabbis arrived in Warsaw, Krakow, and Wroclaw, and a progressive (equivalent to reform in North America) rabbi in Warsaw. Small communities are coming together in cities and towns around the country such as Krakow, Lublin, and Chelm, publicly proclaiming their desire to be Jewish.

15. (U) Officially there are between 8,000 and 20,000 Jews currently living in Poland, although estimates run as high as 60,000. Many Poles who were born and raised Catholic are finding out as young adults that they were actually Jewish but their parents or grandparents hid this fact. Following this discovery, many such people have returned to synagogues to embrace and learn about their roots, and several have made the stronger commitment of officially converting to Judaism (even undergoing ritual circumcision). Equally noteworthy are those with no Jewish heritage who are looking into Jewish culture, history, music, and even faith. Finally, youth groups such as the Union of Jewish Students (PUSZ) in Warsaw and Czulent in Krakow are active and constantly attracting new

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members. As a result, whereas ten years ago there were 200 active members in the total Warsaw community with an average age in the 70s, there are now three active congregations with over 700 participants and the average age has dropped into the 40s.

CHALLENGES FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT

16. (C) However, as described in Reftel, many Jewish groups are concerned with the persistence of anti-Semitism both in and out of the government. Progress on Jewish property restitution is slow, anti-Semitic graffiti is common in small towns, "Jew" is a frequent slur, and the most widespread image of Jewish people in Poland is a that of an elderly man with a long beard counting his money. Amazingly, these are not seen by the general population as inherently anti-Semitic, but rather as "cultural." Notwithstanding the May 27 attack on Rabbi Michael Schudrich, openly violent acts of anti-Semitism are rare. Israeli DCM Yossef Levy calls the phenomenon "fairy tale anti-Semitism" based on myths and legends rather than an active hatred, noting that the situation in Poland is no worse than that in most European countries, and in some cases much better. This is partly owing to the lack of any significant Jewish community, and also to the absence of a sizable Arab immigrant population. Levy also noted that many Israeli embassy officers wear yarmulkes in public and have not experienced any problems.

17. (SBU) Tensions exist among the different groups in the Jewish community, notably the Warsaw branch of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities (Gmina) and Beit Warszawa, a progressive (equivalent to reform in North America) synagogue which on October 20 officially installed Burt Schuman as the first progressive rabbi in Poland since before the Holocaust. The Gmina is the legal Jewish body in Poland, has special

tax status as such, and receives restituted communal property. It excludes Beit Warszawa members from use of the ritual bath (mikveh) and burial in the Jewish cemetery. Rabbi Schuman's arrival several months ago has spurred some thaw between the groups. Both he and Rabbi Schudrich are New Yorkers, and through their cooperation the two communities have come together to celebrate holidays on multiple occasions.

18. (C) This division has served as a minor, albeit noteworthy deterrent to some wishing to live openly as Jews. Another obstacle is the lingering belief and fear that Poland is completely anti-Semitic. Many Jewish adults grew up hearing horror stories about the Holocaust and communist eras and refuse to believe that things have changed. Warsaw University Professor Piotr Soltan says he would like to place a mezuzah (small box with a Jewish prayer) on his door post but his wife, who is not open about her roots, refuses since "the neighbors will know." She believes the stress of being "'outed" as Jewish in the 1970s led to her father's early death and wants no outward sign that she or her children are Jews. TV producer Szaj Szendel recently started attending synagogue in his late 30s after his father admitted to him that they were Jewish. After counseling with the rabbi he decided to pursue formal conversion, undergo circumcision, and even change his name to sound more Jewish. His father warned him against such a course, and eventually relented but calls his son "crazy" for making this choice.

19. (U) To many Polish Jews, "never again" is not only a rallying cry to remember the Holocaust, but a warning never again to be openly Jewish. While efforts to commemorate the Holocaust, rededicate abandoned cemeteries, and fight anti-Semitism are both necessary and commendable, some Polish Jews say an exclusive focus on these serve to perpetuate the cult of victimhood as the only option and by definition forestall the development of active Jewish life. Those who are pursuing such a life need encouragement. There have been Jews in Poland for nearly 1,000 years ranging from extremely orthodox to progressive and fully integrated, and recent trends show that this is still true and that numbers are increasing.
HILLAS